

COSMOPOLITAN CHRONICLE

True tales from the annals of history, archaeology, construction, and restoration of the Casa de Bandini and Cosmopolitan Hotel.
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The Contractors

Victor A. Walsh
District Historian
San Diego Coast District

In 1869, Albert Seeley hired Parsons Brothers to renovate Juan Bandini's single-story adobe and convert it into the two-story Cosmopolitan Hotel.

Henry F. and Samuel H. Parsons operated a construction business on Fifth Street downtown near Alonzo E. Horton's wharf. Advertisements in the *San Diego Union* identified them as architects, builders, and carpenters.

Parsons Brothers specialized in producing moldings, trims, doors, sashes, blinds, and other ornamental finished woodwork. They catered to an exclusive clientele, building commercial establishments and homes for New San Diego's upper crust, including remodeling Horton's elegant home.

They had certain advantages that other San Diego contractors did not. Their complex of shops was located next to a large lumber yard run by McDonald, Gale

& Co., and their workforce used steam-driven lathes and other machines to mill, turn, and finish lumber. The yard also had two brick kilns.

The June 30, 1869 issue of the *San Diego Union* described Parsons Brothers' operation as "...something new and useful..." They not only built and assembled houses, including prefabs, but also sold finished goods to other contractors. Mass-production and speed, as the reporter notes below, was their trademark:

"We noticed sash-doors and blinds in all stages, from the lumber sawed into shape to be painted and finished articles ready to place in the buildings. They have several pieces of moulding of rare finish made in their shops. All milling and boring done by machinery. The whole establishment is driven by steam.

Just as steam power has advantages over blood and muscle, so have these gentlemen advantages over builders who are getting along without the aid of it. Notwithstanding their facilities of steam and machinery, these gentlemen employ not less than fifteen men weekly to push on their heavy

operations.

Jobs are taken and the houses are constructed in the lumber yard or at the shops, already to put together when they are taken to the ground, and put together on short notice."

The Cosmo's character-defining wooden exterior features — its clapboard, turned columns, baluster railings, window trim and sashes, pilasters and bracketed cornices — were not made in San Francisco or Monterey as initially suspected, but right here in San Diego by Parsons Brothers.

The other interesting aspect is that the partnership dissolved in November 1869 shortly after completion of the Cosmopolitan. Why Samuel sold out his interest to his brother remains a mystery, but his timing was fortuitous because shortly after the country would be mired in a major depression. By the early 1870s, San Diego's real estate boom had collapsed, wreaking havoc for the construction trade and many other local businesses.

I would like to thank historian Ellen Sweet for researching this and other Cosmopolitan articles.

